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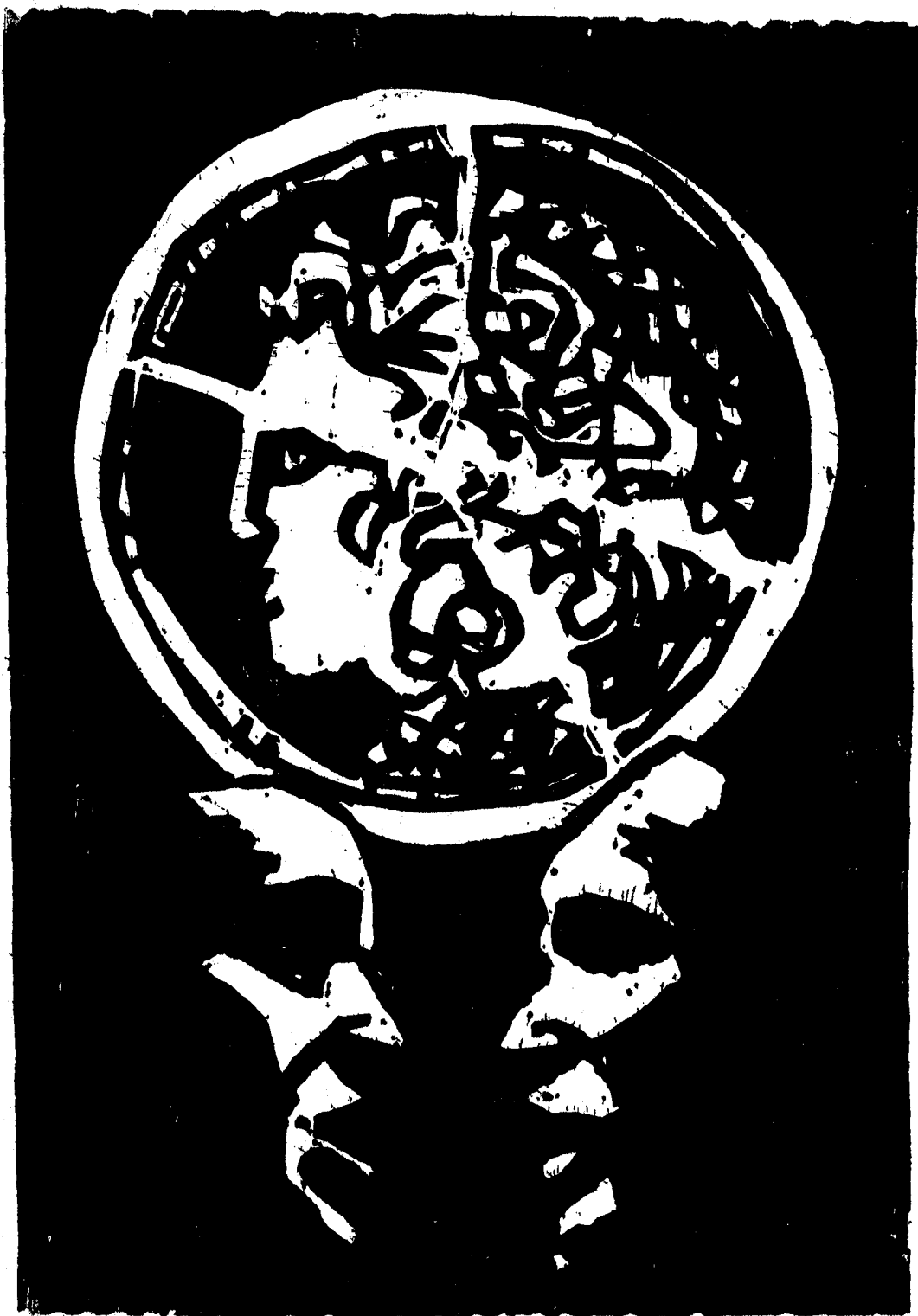
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*The taxes were high, and the collector could understand the man's problem.
But the matter had to be settled*

the NEGOTIATORS

by Jack Ritchie

It was pleasant sitting in the shade enjoying the soft Mediterranean breeze. Down below, the fishermen in their boats were visible on the horizon, and to my right the vineyard workers dotted the hillsides.

This was a beautiful villa, one of the most spacious I had ever entered, and I thought that perhaps in a few years, if I were careful, I too might have one much like it somewhere.

The owner was a rather large man and given to fat. His hair was well groomed and one had the impression that he had just stepped out of the bath. "And so the government is not satisfied with the amount I paid in taxes this year?"

I sighed. "Unfortunately no. Looking over our records, the department estimates that you have paid less than ten percent of what we expected."

He laughed. "Ridiculous. I am an honest man who honors all his obligations to the full. Especially to the state."

I smiled.

He sipped his wine. "This tax collecting is a fatiguing business, is it not?"

I nodded. "I am a tired and worn man when I return home."

He studied me warily. "What happened to the man who came to see me last year?"

"He is no longer with us."

"Oh? He passed on?"

"In a manner of speaking. He departed suddenly and no one seems to know exactly where he has gone. But there are rumors that he was seen chartering an entire vessel for a long voyage, destination unknown." I clicked my tongue sadly. "But I fail to see how this could be true. A civil servant cannot afford such travel. It must be very expensive."

He tasted the wine again. "Are you interested in travel?"

I shrugged. "It is but an unobtainable dream."

He smiled faintly. "Civil servants are always poorly paid. The government is so ungrateful for loyalty, hard

work, and honesty."

I agreed. "It hardly pays these days to be honest. There are so few of us left."

He looked seaward. "Your predecessor was a most reasonable man. He could understand the problems of the poor . . . and the rich."

"Ah?" I said. "Do the rich have their problems too?"

"Of course. To *remain* rich. That is the problem. No one seems to sympathize with us these days."

His eyes came back to me. "How long have you been working for the tax office?"

"Seven years," I said. "Seven long years. I began at the very bottom and I have applied myself and slaved until I have achieved this present position." I watched a single cloud in the clear blue sky. "Let us hope that all the struggle and effort has been worthwhile."

He studied his gold ring. "Is it your ambition to make tax work your career? Your *entire* life's work?"

I sighed. "What else can a poor man do but work all his life? And dream. But alas, dreams cost money if they are to become realities."

Down below, I noticed Mario stretched out beneath an olive tree. He seemed to be asleep.

"There are those who lie in the shade," I said, "And those who toil in the sun."

My host agreed. "This might strike some people as unfair, but nevertheless it is the nature of things and we must face reality. The world is not always shaped exactly as we want it to be."

"Of course not," I said. "We must accept what exists."

There was a silence, and then he folded his hands over his ample stomach. "I believe that ours is by far the most advanced and civilized method of paying taxes. One simply meets with the tax collector and reasons with him."

"Precisely," I said. "There are some countries which do not appreciate our custom, but I believe, in the end, that

it is they who are the losers," I smiled. "But here, in the spirit of reasonableness, we try to see that the state is satisfied without impoverishing the taxpayer."

He toyed with his goblet. "And how much do you think will satisfy the state?"

I rubbed my chin and appeared to give the matter thought. Finally I spoke. "I believe that the state would be very happy if you were to triple your contribution."

"Ridiculous," he snapped.

But he would have said that no matter what I had asked — and so we talked.

Eventually we came to the agreement that both the state and the taxpayer would be pleased if he merely doubled his taxes for the year.

He watched me pack the money. "How much of that will actually reach the treasury?"

I smiled. "There will, of course, be some attrition. Let us be honest enough to admit that. But the state will be satisfied, you will be relieved, and I will be a step nearer to my dreams."

"You are all rascals," he said almost sadly. "If I reported you, you would go to prison."

"Possibly," I said, "but you would occupy the cell next to me."

We had more wine and eventually his good spirit returned. When I rose to leave, he walked with me down the terrace to the edge of his property.

"Unfortunately, taxes will always be with us," he said.

I agreed. And tax evaders, I thought, but I did not say so.

He wiped some faint perspiration from his forehead with the edge of his tunic. "So Caesar is really dead? It is difficult to believe."

"But true," I said. "I myself was present at the funeral oration. Some say that Marc Antony was outstanding, but as for me, I thought the words were rather ordinary."

I threw a stone at my dozing slave and sent him to fetch the horses. 